



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Date: July 27, 2018

To: Carrie Leverenz, Director of Composition

From: Ann George

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ann George". The signature is written over a vertical line that separates it from the "From:" label.

Re: Teaching Observation for Sara Kelm

On March 27, 2018, I observed Sara Kelm's themed Introductory Composition course (ENGL 10803), which met at 11:00-12:20 in Reed 120 (computer classroom). Ms. Kelm's course, "Writing (for) Online (Communities)," impressed me as an interesting, inventive take on first-year composition, the conception and delivery of which reflected both best practices in writing instruction and Ms. Kelm's personal commitment to students and their learning.

The course design for "Writing (for) Online (Communities)" draws upon both Ms. Kelm's interest in / experience with online writing and her considerable knowledge of composition theory and pedagogy. As the syllabus notes, our lives are so entangled with the internet, that we don't often stop to really examine how it shapes our knowledge, beliefs, and behavior. In the course, then, students "look[] at different types (genres) of writing on the internet, talk[] about how/why/for whom they work, and then do[] [their] own writing in these genres." A genre approach is an excellent structure for the course (it's central to the course outcomes and makes assignments distinctive), and the ever-widening focus of the writing tasks—beginning with the personal "About Me" Page and analysis of an avatar to a Wikipedia-style article on a notable TCU event, building, person, etc. to a community profile and engagement projects—gave the course an explicit direction and enabled students to build on skills developed in the previous unit. I was especially impressed that Ms. Kelm had students post all their projects in an online portfolio (which they built on Weebly) because that gave students much-needed digital composing skills and a "live" audience; this public audience, in turn, raised issues of "ethics and privacy in digital spaces"—issues, whose real-world consequences are currently playing out before our very eyes.

On the day I observed Ms. Kelm, students were turning in their collaboratively produced "TCU-pedia" pages and beginning to discuss their next assignment: writing a profile of an online community. The lesson was beautifully planned and paced, with a variety of writing and discussion activities that students worked on individually, in small groups, and as a whole class. The overall movement of the lesson was an in-depth reflection on students' learning and accomplishments in the Wikipedia assignment as preparation for/segue into the online community profile.

Ms. Kelm arrived early to set up the computer and greet students. After a quick forecast of the day's goals, Ms. Kelm gave students ten minutes to write their thoughts about these questions (which they emailed to her):

- (1) What did I learn about the value of Wikipedia?
- (2) What did I learn about Wikipedia's limitations?
- (3) What makes a good Wikipedia page?
- (4) Which team's page was especially strong?

(5) What is something (an idea, a skill) that you'll take into the next unit?

Having students write such reflections, which Ms. Kelm routinely does at the end of a unit, is just one example of her implementing best practices in her teaching. This is such an important move, and I have rarely seen it done as effectively as Ms. Kelm did it, perhaps because she devoted enough class time to make the exercise really count and because she was so clearly interested in students' responses. I especially liked the last question—what a good way to help students realize just how much they've learned! After they'd sent their emails, students had 5 minutes to chat with a few neighbors: to compare answers and pull up the TCU-pedia pages they liked best. Students seemed to have a lot to say. During the writing and small-group discussion, Ms. Kelm wisely walked around the room to see that students were on task and check their progress. (I'd advise her to circle around behind the back desks to further encourage the 1 or 2 students who aren't fully engaged.)

At 11:20, Ms. Kelm began the whole-class discussion: "So, what did you learn?" Since most high-school and many college instructors forbid students to use Wikipedia, they could articulate its limitations (including how easy it is to unconsciously plagiarize), but they were also interested to discuss how it functions as a valid, valuable research tool. When discussion occasionally stalled, I admired Ms. Kelm's skillful encouragement: she was good at waiting through silence, didn't hesitate to call on students (who weren't put on the spot because they'd all written down some ideas, and, as it turned out, always had thoughtful comments), and a tool I'm going to steal—"Let me hear just one more example" or "Let me hear two more ideas." Somehow, her asking for a small number of responses made students more willing to contribute. In addition, Ms. Kelm did a wonderful job affirming students' responses and experiences.

The most enjoyable part of the class for me was hearing students report on a writing skill or insight they'd use in future assignments because they could articulate so many things they'd gained from the assignment! Ms. Kelm went around the room collecting answers from everyone: learning to use online databases, using new research methods (interviews, for instance, and Special Collections), collaborating effectively, becoming more comfortable with peer review, creating and sticking to a research plan, thinking more carefully about audience, and my favorite, realizing the importance of diction—trying to maintain Wikipedia's (allegedly) neutral stance made students both more conscious of word choice and more aware of how much loaded language they typically encounter or use. These varied and valuable payoffs demonstrated the brilliance of Ms. Kelm's "TCU-pedia" assignment design and of the instruction she provided to support it. How many first-year students learn to use the library's Special Collections? And what a savvy way to help students see how difficult it is to write "objectively"—even as they started to learn that there's no such thing. The assignment had the added benefit of further introducing new students to the TCU community and letting them become experts about things they may not have paid much attention to. Ms. Kelm later sent me links to some of her students' TCU-pedia pages, and I was surprised how much I learned from them and how effectively they worked. She was justly proud of students' achievements.

At 11:35, Ms. Kelm segued into the new assignment by asking students if they could see the course trajectory: "Where did we start and how did we build?" This is yet another example of Ms. Kelm's use of best practices: it's so easy for instructors to skip this step, assuming students see how the course is put together. But they often don't unless we call it to their attention. Once asked, students readily identified the movement from self to community. The next 25 minutes were devoted to discussion of the term *community*. Again, she asked students to jot down ideas: "What makes something a community?" The class compiled a long list on the board, then Ms. Kelm made the final shift into the assignment: "How would we change this list for online communities?"

At noon, Ms. Kelm handed out the assignment prompt, most of which students read aloud. (Another idea I loved—students call on each other to read, so they're much more likely to listen than if the instructor reads it all.) Ms. Kelm struck me as a great guide; she often stopped students to point out pitfalls and offer suggestions. If I were a student in the class, I would feel I was in good hands. She also pointed out that this unit had some longer, more challenging readings—a smart heads-up. I would simply suggest that she not be apologetic about that reading or acknowledge that they might not do it; when she said, "I know you're busy...." it felt a bit as if she were giving students an excuse not to do the work.

Ms. Kelm dismissed class at 12:18. I left feeling admiration for—and inspired by—Ms. Kelm's course design and pedagogical skill. It was a lovely lesson, and I was grateful I had an opportunity to observe. Grateful, too, that we have such caring, effective instructors at the helm!